

# Let *Wen* Shine Forth: The Chinese Poetic Tradition and the English Composition Course



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Man is the finest essence of the Five Agents, and truly the mind of heaven and earth. When mind was born, then language was established; when language was established, the wen [literature/patterns] shone forth. This is natural principle.

—Liu Xie: *Wenxindiaolong*

In his *Wenxin diaolong* (*The Literary Mind and Craving of Dragons: A.D 502*), a wide-ranging literary criticism that encompasses virtually all the issues and topics relating to rhetoric, Liu Xie emphasizes over and over again that there exists a fundamental correspondence between and among cosmic patterns and operations and those of human mind/culture, as indicated by the above quotation. By linking literature/literary composing process with the configuration of natural phenomena, Liu reinforces a core value in the Chinese literary tradition that literature is a harmonizing process that brings together various natural and human patterns. This process may be characterized primarily by one word—*Wen*. Though it can be used in various contexts to mean words, language, writing, literature, embellishment, aesthetics, culture, etc, *Wen*'s essential meaning is that of patterns. It denotes patterns of cosmic order—the signs above and below (i.e. “in heaven and earth”) and those of human mind and language. Thus, *Wen* is not merely an outer correlative or external decoration of an inner meaning or essence; rather, it is the externalization of an inner mind, an inner mind/heart that, “born together with heaven and earth” and absorbing all “finest essence” of the universe, ultimately forms an enriched pattern of its own.

It is through the lens of *Wen*—the woven patterns of interior and exterior worlds, patterns of mind and language—that I wish to re-look at some of the issues in current composition studies, issues that are specifically related to the interrelationship between the writing subject and the outer world and to the literary composing process through which this relationship is established. This process, to borrow Liu Xie's term, may be described as a “double journey.” The writer, after responding to the universe/nature, quietly contemplates the images he is confronted with and their relations to his innermost spirit. This contemplation then moves from the inner to the outer world to mingle with the external things and eventually returns with them to one's own mind.

Central to this “double journey” and to this harmonizing process is the writer's active and meaningful interaction with external world at both the psychological and literary levels. While we need to open up paths of communication between the interior writing subject “I” or “We” to the exterior “You” or “They,” we also need to travel the paths through an imaginative act which, as Robert Neale states, shows “humanity at its most creative, taking the building blocks (images) of the world and rearranging them into new structures, altering reality as we know it” (18). This literary capacity provides for us an access into inner patterns of our own worlds and those of others, deepening our apprehension not only of ourselves, but also of the world as a larger text inscribing immensely complex yet productive human experience.

To embark on this “double journey,” however, we need first to have a clear understanding of the status of the writing subject in the composing process. In current composition studies, the personal presence in writing has been one of the most-often debated topics, and still remains so. While some scholars place much emphasis on the specific forms of individual subjectivity, others argue that “academic writing”—the heart of a composition course—is a process of coming to terms with other texts and therefore it should be impersonal (Clark 248).

This debate, reflected in our composition classrooms, transforms itself into a question that is seemingly perpetual. Many of us might have been asked by our students this simple question—“Can I use the first person pronoun?” Regardless of what types of assignments they are asked to write—personal narrative (yes!), literary criticism or argument—students seem always uncertain if they “can” or “are allowed to” use the first-person pronoun in their essays. Because of the complexities that underlie any use of the first-person pronoun and the whole issue of point of view in general, this very basic question is also the most perplexing one.

To address this issue requires us to think carefully about the meaning of the status of writer and about the struggle over the place of the writer. My response to this question, based on my understanding of both English and Chinese,

the two languages I use to write, is that the personal (first person) and impersonal (third person) do not have to be placed in binary opposition. They are complementary, rather than contradictory, elements in the composing process. By addressing the specific nature and the patterning of the relationships indicated in the use of the personal pronoun in both languages, I hope to illustrate that the writing subject at the heart is essentially a self that is rooted in its relationship to a larger world and is dependent on an active response and recognition of this world. Locating the literary composing process in the interactive space between this self and the outer world, the writer takes an initial step in the “double journey.”

English, derived from the Indo-European language family, relies heavily upon formal grammatical structures typical of an inflected language in which the linguistic conventions of cases, gender, mood, and tense are expected and found. For instance, an English sentence would require an absolute clarity of the subject of a verb such as the first-person pronoun. It must be present to help the reader make sense of the meaning of that sentence; the omission of this pronoun, except in dialogues, would normally render the sentence an incomplete one.

Compared with English, Chinese, being a completely uninflected language, is not burdened with cases, genders, moods, and tenses. This does not mean, however, that the Chinese language is incapable of making such distinctions. Rather, alternative means have evolved to express these qualifying conditions when it is deemed desirable to do so. Just as it does not require any indication of ‘number’ or ‘tense’, Chinese is also marked by a frequent omission of the subject of a verb, especially in traditional Chinese poetry. Where Wordsworth wrote, “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” a Chinese poet would probably have written simply “Wander as Cloud” (Liu 22).

In its structure and form, the first-person pronoun “I” in English language is clear and consistent. It has only one singular form—“I”—a simple and straight letter that evokes a strong and forceful image of an individual human being. This linguistic feature is, I believe, in correspondence to the core value in the American cultural and literary tradition that emphasizes the individual self and identity, a tradition that can be traced back to the works by many great American writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, to name just a few.

In Chinese, however, the first-person pronoun “I” is often allusive and ambiguous. Traditionally, it was deemed inappropriate for people to use the formal and direct first-person pronoun *Wu*. Instead, they were expected to refer to themselves by using pronouns that matched with their respective social and gender status. For example, while King may call himself *Zhen* (meaning: the son of heaven), a servant could only mention himself as *Zaixia* or *Xiaoren* (meaning: lower or smaller person). Different pronouns were also used to address different persons. A middle-class female would refer herself alternately as *Qie* (wife), *Nu* (slave) or *Xiaonu* (small female person) to her husband/lover, her superior or her father. Similarly, these variations of the first-person pronoun in Chinese language reflect a traditional Chinese way of thinking that emphasizes the importance of the relationship of the individual being to others and to the society as a whole.

This tendency to turn away from the use of the first person for self-representation has without doubt undermined and undervalued the presence of the writing/speaking subject. However, the frequent absence of the first-person pronoun in Chinese language, particularly in the classic poetry, has also created a sense of timelessness and universality.

Let’s take a look at a poem by one of the Chinese classic poets, Wang wei:

Empty/mountain/not/see/people  
Only/hear/people/talk/sound  
Reflected/light/enter/upon/deep/forest  
Again/shine/green/moss/upon.

In this poem, the poetic focus proceeds from the massiveness of a mountain to a ray of the setting sun entering a mossy grove, and finally to the speaker himself. If translated into English word for word, we may notice an apparent absence of syntactical cooperation among parts of speech—there is no subject which leads to a verb to an object such as we find in English. The poet simply says “not see people”, not “I do not see anyone.” In an English version of the poem, the first person pronoun will have to be inserted in order to make the meaning clearer.

Without a personal pronoun, the first line seems to imply a non-existence of human presence, or at least devoid of any visible human presence. Yet, the “emptiness” of the mountain seems difficult to accept when we observe that the poet specifies a particular kind of absence, filling the scene with invisible presence—the vision and the eyes of the speaker, the mountain reverberating with the echoes of human voices—either from reality or from the poet’s memories.

By omitting the first person pronoun, or the subject, the poet consequently avoided awkward questions that might occur to the reader, questions such as “if no one is here, who is hearing the voices?” Or if “you are here, how can the

mountains be said to be empty?" Instead, the reader is made to feel the presence of Nature as a whole, in which the mountains, the human voices, the sunlight, the mosses, are all equals. Such omission of the subject allows the poet not to intrude his own personality upon the scene, for the missing subject can be readily identified with people other than the poet himself. And in this situation there is no need to indicate or to specify the speakers or the agent of the action; to do so would restrict the poem, at least in the linguistic level, to one participant only, whereas freedom from the personal pronoun universalises the state of being or feeling, providing a scene or a situation into which all the reader would move, as it were, to take part directly.

If one can form a basis of subjectivity through the exercise of language, as shown in the use of personal pronoun in this poem, we may say that in bringing about both presence and absence of the first-person pronoun in English and Chinese, we may compose a different kind of subjectivity, a subjectivity that is in both singular and plural forms. Since writers will inevitably bring a certain point of view to whatever they write, the question is really not about *can or cannot*, but more about *where* and *how*. Whereas we need to acknowledge and affirm a strong presence of a writing subject, as indicated by the powerful status of the English "I", we may also want to understand that this writing subject is consisted of the presence of many others, as illustrated by the functional absence of Chinese first-person pronoun.

Positioning the writing subject in a larger context of the literary process is, however, only an initial stage of the "double journey." In order to explore the links between and among various patterns—internal and external ones—we need to exercise our power of imagination, which is "a shaping power and prime agent of all human perception and an analytical and speculative instrument" that "focus on our meaning-making process"(Berthoff 192). It is through this imaginative power that we are enabled to translate various exterior patterns into our inward experiences and then transform these experiences into a new version of knowledge about ourselves and about the world of which we are integral parts.

This imaginative dimension of the composing process remains another issue in the current composition studies. More often than not, writing instruction for a general, or a first-year composition course, is still perceived as the act of teaching a discrete set of skills; reading and writing—the core activities of a composition course—is still regarded as a technical capacity that needs to be acquired as a useful tool in the mastery of more significant and substantive academic subjects. This particularly instrumental view of writing curriculum makes it hard to contend that writing is a complex and creative learning process that involves our constant efforts to explore our mind/heart. Language is at the center of our knowledge of ourselves and others. It is also a social construction, a constantly changing set of formations whose meanings emerge as writers/readers engage in an active and creative dialogues with each other.

This creative dimension of language has been addressed by many scholars in the composition studies. In his *The Literary Mind*, for example, Mark Turner explains that "human imaginative capability" is "the fundamental instrument of thought" and is "indispensable to human cognition. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining"(16-18). Peter Elbow, in one of his recent essays about composition and literature courses, also suggests that the imaginative dimension of language "should be given an equally (as in a literature class) central place" to "the culture of composition," because "rhetoric and poetics" are "two essential dimensions of language" (539). Joseph Wessling, in his article entitled "Cultural Literacy and the Analogical Imagination," argues that the analogical imagination, which "includes the poetic faculty, generative of metaphors, of symbols, and of fiction that externalize for contemplation of the inner experiences of human kind," empowers writers/readers with "the symbols" that can help them "fix past and play with the future, possible and impossible"(3).

Built upon the strength of these arguments, my discussion of this literary capacity places much emphasis on its potential to take the writer/reader on an outbound journey that elevates the composing process to a status of cosmic significance. When using the term "images" and by extension, "imagination," or *Xiangxiang* (meaning: "to visualize an image of someone or something," a modern Chinese equivalent of imagination in English), I intend to highlight another meaning implied in the word *Xiangxiang*—*shensi* which carries connotations of both the ideas of artistic creativity /invention and the interaction between the artist's interior mind-heart /emotion and exterior world. It is through the organizing power of this *Xiangxiang/Shensi* that the mind (heart—*xin*) is capable of transcending the interior world of the individual and traverse great distances and "see" many things from multiple perspectives.

In the chapter 26 of *Wenxin diaolong*, "Spritual thinking," Liu Xie describes a state that transcends the limits of space and time:

In literary thinking, one's spirit is far-reaching. Thus when one concentrates and ponders in silence, one's thoughts can touch a thousand years. With a quiet move of the face, one's gaze can penetrate ten thousand miles. While humming and chanting one spits forth melodies of pearls and jade. Before one's eyebrows and lashes, scenes of windblown clouds furl and unfurl. These are what the order of thought attains. Therefore, when the order of thought is subtle, the spirit and objects wander together.

Here we see that the writer's intuitive contemplation "moves beyond the boundaries of the immediate context in imaginative flights" (Yu 36). This outbound flight, often taken as the meaning of "spirit and thought", or shensi, is the result of a well-coordinated operation of different processes which Liu identifies as "the perceptual processes" (aural and visual) and "the intellectual processes" (the conscious use of language) (Cai 52). These processes are crucial "to mediate the influx of things from afar:" when the "principle of thought" is at its most miraculous, the spirit wanders with external things (WXDL 26/16-17).

For us—readers/writers alike—to engage in this operation of both perceptual and intellectual processes means that we need to cultivate and develop an imaginary mind that is not only capable of seeing and hearing the images we are confronted with, but also capable of mingling with these images—shensi—letting our inner spirit go out to the external world before eventually returning to the world of our own. This imaginative journey is essentially a process of working of our mind as we are caught up in others' and our own experiences. As Liu Xie explains, "external things come in through the ear and the eye, with language controlling the hinges and trigger (for their influx)" (WXDL 26/20-21), allowing the writer to wander off to meet things and objects beyond the restrictions of time and space.

One direct result of this imaginary act, or shensi, as Liu suggests, is a mutual transformation of the inner and the outer worlds. In the light of this mutual transformation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish among an image, one's perception of it and one's representation of its significance. While working on one of our writing assignments about places for my first year composition course, for example, we focus on reading various images of place as more than natural phenomenon. To our reading mind, an image like that of the lake in E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" is a pivotal and reflexive surface that defies a rigorous opposition of subject and object. It brings back that very instant or moment in our lives which we, both reader and author, share and through which we connect: an image of inland, a reservoir, an interior sea where we live partly above the surface and partly deep within the water that holds all the past. Such an image cannot be reduced to "simple representation," for it is "saturated with a much greater and many-sided content than a representation abstracted from observation" (Yu 40). This way of reading images allows us not only to map a typography of intimate human space but also helps us follow the moments of a deeper human consciousness.

After responding to the ongoing processes of the outer world through reading, contemplating and mingling with various images, we eventually take our journey back to our own mind after an outbound flight of "A thousand mile" (WXDL 26/16-17). The images offered to us now become really our own. They take root in us and form new patterns. They become part of our version of new knowledge about ourselves and about the world we live in.

This multiple correspondence between cosmic order and the human mind, between mind and language, and between language and literature provides for us insights into various patterns of the universe and human mind. In composing and weaving these patterns through a double journey that allows us to travel both inbound and outbound, we—both readers and writers—are connected to each other by a generative power of *Wen*—the power of mind/heart that is born out of the finest essence of the universe. After all, the ultimate function of the literary composing process is to establish profound links that hold together all things in the universe and thus bring out a harmony to the humanity. It is from this harmony that *Wen* inside us can shine forth.

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